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ABSTRACT

In this study researchers wanted to discover school principals' attitudes about reported increases in the proportion of men teaching very young children. Elementary school principals in southern Manitoba were interviewed about their attitudes toward beginning teachers in early childhood (nursery-kindergarten) education. At the time of writing, about 50 principals had been intereviewed concerning their opinions and attitudes about new teachers, generally, and men in early childhood education, specifically. Principals seemed less concerned with teachers' specific skills or training and more concerned with teachers' personal qualities, such as warmth, kindness, love of children, and ability to create a happy creative atmosphere in the classroom. Most principals seemed to feel isolated from their peers and different from or more radical than them in their practices and educational philosophy. Almost all expressed a wish that more men could be found who were qualified and willing to teach very young children. None stated that the gender of a person directly determined whether or not he/she was hired. Principals were quick to point out, however, that a man had to be unusual to work in early childhood education, since he would be contradicting social expectations about what men do for livelihood. (Author/RH)

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ATTITUDES OF PRINCIPALS ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS

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Considerable concern has developed recently about the apparent oversupply of beginning teachers for the public schools, particularly in elementary and early childhood education. While the extent of the problem has sometimes been exaggerated, it does seem to be a "real" one. Estimates of the percentages of unemployed and underemployed teachers in Manitoba range from about 15% to 50%, depending on the method of calculation and on who is doing the estimating. Teaching is no longer a field for college graduates to fall back on if they cannot think of anything else to do.

Under these conditions, both students and Faculties of Education should understand as clearly as possible the wishes and needs of the schools in offering whatever positions remain. The hiring personnel -- most notably the principals -- have an equal interest in making these needs known to the current graduates who are applying for the jobs. Some educators and members of the public, of course, might disagree with the staffing needs and job descriptions expressed by school administrators. But all would have to agree that these needs should at least be made known more easily to potential new members of the teaching profession.

Communication has often been poor, however, between principals and education graduates applying to the schools for the first time. For various reasons, the gap has been especially wide for the early childhood grades - nursery and kindergarten. Principals have tended to be recruited from upper

elementary grades, or even from secondary education, and therefore often have little experience with younger children and only a vague understanding of the job or working with them. At the same time, teachers of younger children have a tradition of avoidance of the problems of administration, and may therefore avoid understanding "the system" during their training program, as well as after they are on the job. During an interview for a teaching job, such a person may imply indifference to administration, or even state a dislike for it openly.

Such poor communication will hurt both the individual applicant and the school doing the hiring, the first may not receive a "fair" hearing at her interview, and the second may end up with a less-than-ideal choice on its staff. Somehow, then, ways must be found to bridge this gap between the new recruits to early childhood education and the "old hands" at teaching. The study described below was intended as a step in this direction.

Problem and Method of Study

Elementary school principals in southern Manitoba were interviewed about their attitudes toward beginning teachers in early childhood (nursery-kindergarten) education. Very complete responses to several basic questions were sought, including supporting examples wherever they could be given without violating the privacy of individuals. At the time of writing, about fifty principals have been interviewed. About two-third's of these came from metropolitan Winnipeg, and the remainder from rural and small town schools within about one hundred miles of the city. In general, each interview lasted from 30 to 60 minutes, depending on the gregariousness of the principal.

The questions used in the interviews are listed in Table 1. The list was followed rather closely, though flexibly enough to allow for natural digressions. In addition, we chatted with each principal informally after

finishing the questions, both to explain the nature of the study more fully, and to bring out any further of their ideas or feelings that may not have emerged during the "official" questions.

The interviews covered two major areas: opinions and attitudes about new teachers generally, and those about men in early childhood education specifically. The latter topic followed up on recent increases reported in the proportion of men teaching very young children (Seifert, 1976; Lee, 1973). The effects of this trend for the profession are still unclear. In part, it seems to be the result of shifting sex-role expectations in North American society. But it is also a factor in creating this change in expectations, at least within the teaching profession and among parents of young children who have male teachers. In our study, we wanted to learn the principals' attitudes about this social change. To what extent are principals supporting the entry of men into early childhood education; to what extent are they indifferent to it; and to what extent are they reluctant to see it occur? Principals, like other human beings, may not act upon the attitudes they express in an interview, but their self-reports at least give a good starting point for understanding them.

Results of the Interviews

What, then, did we discover? How do principals feel about early childhood teachers in general, and about the entry of men into the field in particular? Let us look first at their general attitudes.

It was clear that even though principals all had opinions about early childhood teachers, most had had very little experience in expressing their attitudes in the actual hiring of nursery or kindergarten teachers. The average principal that we spoke to had worked for about five years as a principal, but had only hired about three early childhood teachers during that time. Most of

these hirings had been for kindergarten, rather than nursery. Several reported never having hired any early childhood teacher at all. One principal reported hiring "about forty" such teachers over about a ten-year period, but this had happened in a West German armed forces school that had experienced almost complete staff turnover every year. Usually, principals were speaking from personal acquaintance with only a few individuals in the field of early childhood education.

Teaching as "Motherhood"

Their lack of broad contacts with the specialty, however, did not prevent the principals from having opinions and attitudes about it. Most expressed pride or contentment with the particular early childhood teachers at their schools. They seemed, however, not so concerned with the teachers' specific skills or training, as much as with their general personal qualities -- warmth, kindness, love of children -- and with their ability to create a certain atmosphere in class -- a happy, creative place to be.

> "I like to see smiling children working at the different centres around the room. Everything is humming and the teacher is the guide and calming influence."
>
> "I'm impressed when I see children responding to the warmth of the teacher and the room, and therefore feeling free to approach an adult."
>
> "I feel good when I see that the kindergarten is a calm, relaxed place -- busy and happy -- everyone is doing something and is feeling good about it."

Often these decriptions sounded suspiciously like stereotyped descriptions of traditional "motherhood". Few comments were made about specific activities or goals of the early childhood teacher, even after we probed for them. Nor were comments made about specific frustrations that the teacher might have felt in carrying out her job. The latter omission, of course, may have shown a

concern for the privacy of the staff, and the desire to "put the best foot forward" in the interviews. But in conjunction with the rest of their descriptions, ignorance of the early childhood teacher's role may also be part of the cause.

Support for this possibility comes from the fact that very few of the principals had had significant teaching experience in kindergarten or the primary grades. Of the fifty principals interviewed, only two had ever taught kindergarten for even one year of their careers. These two were notable in making more specific comments, at least about their ideal early childhood teacher. One, for example, said all of the following:

> "She's got to be in good health."
>
> "Someone who expresses an awareness of the whole child - we can't teach them anything until they feel good about themselves."
>
> "She can't worry about herself - she can't be self-conscious. Some of the things we do in kindergarten you wouldn't tell your friends."
>
> "The person must know how a child develops and must have the insight and skills necessary to bring a child from point A to point B."
>
> " A sense of humour."
>
> "Have energy to burn."
>
> "You've got to be aware of every child."
>
> "Someone who wants to know about a child's home - what his homelife is like."
>
> "A good listener."

The rest of the principals presumably had learned about young children by visiting other teachers' classrooms, by talking with kindergarten teachers, or by raising children of their own. Some may have learned a lot of these methods, but probably not as much as by managing their own classroom of young children for an extended period of time.

The lack of concern for skills and training may also reflect a general

lack of consensus in the schools about what young children should accomplish in class. Kindergarten guides exist in profusion, including some published by the school divisions themselves, but they disagree widely in the activities they suggest, and even more in their rationales for the activities. Kindergarten activities, unfortunately, often appear trivial, at least to those unfamiliar with young children. Understanding the activities' long-range significance often requires tremendous restructuring of "adult-level" knowledge.

If, for example, a child puts bright blops of paint on his canvas at the easel, what has been "accomplished"? Learning about "spatial relations"? Motor co-ordination? Escape from noisy classmates? A picture "of" something? Even highly trained and sensitive teachers of young children cannot answer these questions easily. Under these conditions, it is not surprising for most school principals to confine themselves to generalities.

Often the principals conveyed a feeling of discomfort at the thought of their getting involved in early childhood classrooms. By the same token, many implied a feeling of "awe" that their early childhood staff could survive with young children day after day, and even flourish with them.

> "Personally, I couldn't do it. I just don't have the patience."
>
> "Those people are very special -- to be able to give like that all day ... it must be so demanding."
>
> "I think it's the most difficult grade to teach."
>
> "To take the place of a child's mother - that's a lot of trust."
>
> "Those children are so tiny. Some of them look like babies. How do they talk to them?"

Repeatedly, these comments resembled general praise of traditional "Motherhood" rather than "praise of instruction". The early childhood teacher was thought to require energy, patience, kindness, sensitivity, and the like -- rather as does a "good" mother. Relatively little was said about their knowledge of

curriculum planning from specific goals, varying goals for children with widely varying needs, or about skills in managing a large group of unsocialized individuals.

Isolation and Feeling "Special"

Most principals seemed to feel isolated from their peers, and yet "different" from or more radical than them in their practices and educational philosophy.

> "I'm more liberal than most of the other principals. I have to be, otherwise I would not have survived in this school."
>
> "The other principals are afraid of the system - the superintendent, the teachers and the parents. They'll say what you want to hear."
>
> "I'm more liberal than the others. I read a lot and keep up on the latest trends."
>
> "I'm a maverick. I've been called a reactionary. I've caused a lot of trouble."
>
> "Most principals haven't put as much thought into these questions as I have."

This combination of feelings seemed to enhance the principals' interest in being interviewed. Most welcomed the opportunity and appeared to enjoy themselves during the actual meeting. Only one declined the request to be interviewed, saying that he was "too busy" just then.

Why the "prophet-like" stance? Most principals, for one thing, were physically separated from any true peers -- i.e. other school principals -- during most of their daily work. The isolation might tempt a principal to believe that he was the only one who ever had original ideas, or who ever took them seriously. This attitude might be further reinforced by the nature of the meetings that the principals did have together, which they reported tended to focus on specific business details (enrollment figures, specific equipment needs, transfer of specific children, etc.) rather than on educational philosophy.

While principals may be isolated from other principals physically, they may feel a different kind of isolation from the persons most available to them in the school building -- mainly teachers and parents. With the parents, their relationship is mainly one of "professional responsibility", rather than of true sharing among equals of equivalent concerns. In general, parents tend to be concerned with the welfare of their particular child; and the principal, with providing optimum service for the community as a whole. There is common ground between these two attitudes, but also substantial difference.

With his staff of teachers, the principal may feel more professional sharing than with parents, but even here it is not reasonable to expect from teachers a full understanding of or sympathy for his role as principal. The psychological gap would be especially large with teachers who have no experience with being a principal themselves nor any intention to become one. In this category fall the majority of early childhood teachers.

More Men Needed

The principals almost all expressed a wish that more men could be found who are qualified and willing to teach very young children. This concern existed whether the principal worked in a high-income area or low, and whether he worked in the city of Winnipeg or in a rural location.

> "Our single parent families number about 40% of our population here so we need more men as healthy male models for these kids."
>
> "I would like to have a man at every grade level."
>
> "A man at the nursery-Kindergarten level would benefit the boys. We have too many women in the primary grades - it's not healthy is it?"

Most justified the need for men in early childhood education by pointing to the large and increasing numbers of one-parent families in our province. It was assumed that these single parents were nearly all female; therefore more

male teachers in kindergarten and nursery classrooms would help to compensate for this imbalance.

Principals were quick to point out, however, that a man had to be "unusual" to work in early childhood education, since he would be contradicting social expectations about what men do for livlihood. The feelings that early childhood education and young children are "women's work" exists, they said, among teachers, friends, families, and neighbors -- and in the man himself who enters the field. Contradicting these expectations may not be difficult to do occasionally, but doing so all at once may undermine even the most self-confident man's poise. Therefore a male early childhood teacher must be someone exceptional -- just to be there.

> "A male in early childhood would have to be creative, full of life; possess principles and strong values and not care what others thought of him."
>
> "He'd have to be very sure of himself."
>
> "These guys are special kinds of people just to be there - to put up with the outside flack and to have those feelings for young children."

In spite of these comments, no principal stated that the gender of a person directly determined whether or not he/she was hired. The criteria, at least officially for our interviews, was always qualifications and skills. Their desire to recruit more men into the field only extended, apparently, to comparisons of applicants in which "all things are equal" except gender.

> "No, I'm not looking for a certain sex; I'm looking for the qualities I want in a teacher."
>
> "If he's enthusiastic, capable, and available; if his qualifications are as good as the other applicants - I'd hire him. He has the advantage of being male."

A few also said that they had actively encouraged more male applicants, though they apparently felt that this "affirmative action" did not involve any corresponding reduction of the rights of female applicants.

Most principals, however, simply had had very little experience with male applicants. It is therefore hard to judge how much they might live up to their merit-based intentions in practice. Presumably they would indeed make some effort to be "fair" to both sexes. But it is also reasonable to suppose that they are as much creatures of society's sex-role expectations as anyone else, and that like everyone else's sex-role biases, theirs might operate below full consciousness.

Would their (presumed) biases, however, result in more men being hired, or fewer? The answer might depend on whether the particular principal was more impressed with the applicant's exceptionality ("He must be good just to be there"), or his unbeleivability ("Young children are really women's work"). Our interviews did not compare these attitudes carefully, since they were at least private, and at most unconscious or even non-existent. With few exceptions, no principal considered himself a significant believer in any double-standard of sex roles; but most expressed certainty that "society" held important biases in this area. A contradiction is lurking here that needs to be explored further.

Summary and Conclusions

These principals, then, had several things to say. First, their attitudes about their nursery-kindergarten staff were very supportive, but tended to suggest a lack of much knowledge of what these teachers actually did, and a lack of understanding of the satisfactions that early childhood teaching provides. Second, the principals seemed to feel that they had unusual insights into school teaching and education, and yet also that they lacked persons to share their ideas with. Third, they asserted a need for more men to enter early childhood education, but they admitted that substantial cultural barriers may keep this from happening soon.

The main purpose of this study was to help bridge the communication gap between early childhood teachers and their principals. Hopefully these interview results are a step in that direction. At least two more steps suggest themselves as well, one to deepen our knowledge of the principals' attitudes, and another to study the other group involved in this relationship, namely the teachers themselves. Consider each briefly.

These interviews of principals' attitudes have only "face validity". What the principals said here, for public consumption, may not reflect their behaviour in actual working situations. The significance of what they said, therefore, should be tested further, using methods of observation other than interviews. Can a way be found, for example, to assess the actual extent of principals' isolation from peers in some relatively objective way?

The concern about "face validity" also points to the importance of interviewing the early childhood teachers themselves. Since the principals' perceptions were likely affected by their own job role and previous experiences in it, talking with the teachers themselves might help to put the results of this study into better perspective. Can teachers of young children say more about what they do than these principals could? (Hopefully, yes.) Do early childhood teachers feel as isolated, and yet "special", as the principals? Do they feel as interested in reducing the female bias in early childhood teaching as these principals did? Answers to questions like these may help us to understand better any communication gap that exists between principals and their early childhood staff - and understand how much, in fact, any exists at all.

Table 1

Questions Asked During Interviews

1. How many early childhood (nursery-kindergarten) teachers have you hired?
2. If a teacher is to be a success with young children, what qualities will he/she need?
3. What do you think the most important problems will be for a first-year early childhood teacher?
4. Why would a person choose to go into early childhood teaching, rather than some other kind of teaching?
5. How much control do you have in the hiring of new teachers?
6. Do you remember any positive or negative incidents involving early childhood teachers that you care to relate?
7. When hiring, does the fact that an applicant is male/female affect their chances of success?
8. Can you suggest any ways of encouraging more men to become involved in early childhood education?
9. Do you think that encouraging men into this field is a good idea?
10. Would you expect any differences in classroom management, activities, or appearance between man and women?
11. How long do you expect a man to stay in early childhood education?
12. Sometimes teachers and administrators report uncomfortable feelings about men working in early childhood education. Why might this be so? How can we alleviate them?
13. Do you feel that your responses to these questions are typical of other principals' responses?

(In addition to the above questions, the principals were invited to make any other comments that they considered important and relevant.)

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